

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

The Arduous Search for Female Identity in the American South
in Short Stories by Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty,
Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor

THESES

BÜLGÖZDI IMOLA

Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola
Modern Angol és Amerikai Doktori Program
Témavezető: Dr. Géher István
2009

The focus of the dissertation is the short fiction of Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor and proposes an analysis of their white middle-class Southern female characters within the interpretive framework of their specific time, place and social background, and demonstrates the necessity thereof at the same time. Placing these authors in the context of regional fiction, their oeuvre is investigated as different from both mainstream American writing and the Southern literary tradition epitomised by Faulkner, with special emphasis on the "diurnal politics" of the world of the white Southern middle-class woman. In order to achieve this, the recreation of the main discursive constructs of what could be summarised as "Southern culture" is essential, and the investigation of such a complex matter is carried out in the first three chapters based on Cultural Studies tenets, followed by four chapters analysing the works of each author respectively. The venerable figure of the Southern lady also contributes to the complexity of literary interpretation, and the attendant myths and practices which veil and naturalise the real state of affairs, render the figure of the white middle-class Southern woman worthy of special attention both as character and writer. Therefore, this dissertation aims to reconstruct the interpretive framework of Southern culture around her in order to discover the forces and practices behind the figure on the pedestal, which still looms large in the fiction of these authors, and its influence is still recognisable in diverse forms in the female characters they create.

Contextual Criticism

The investigation of the cultural climate of the time of creation is absolutely necessary for the discussion of such key elements of Southern studies as in what ways these authors subvert or sustain a traditional Southern culture, how they create Southern female identity and subjectivity and to what extent they rely on 'women's culture', what patriarchal constraints they challenge and what they condone and also how they carve out the subject position of Southern woman writer for themselves in circumstances basically inimical to female intellectual accomplishment. Cultural Studies, an interdisciplinary approach that allows for multiple foci – such as the development of Southern culture as distinct from mainstream American culture, the main characteristics of the 'male' South crystallised during the Southern Renaissance and its relationship with the myth of Southern womanhood, for instance – proved to be the most dexterous instrument for getting grips of a field of such complexity.

The theoretical base for the contextual approach is derived from the work of sociologist Stuart Hall, who in his 1995 introduction to *Formations of Modernity* describes culture as one of the four major processes responsible for the transition from Medieval to modern society

along with the political, the economic and the social. In contrast to the Marxist theory of economic base and superstructure Hall declares that “no one process, on its own, provides an adequate explanation of the formation of modern societies. Consequently, no one process is accorded explanatory priority in the analysis” (1995:5). Culture is now seen as a process, a set of practices as opposed to the products of ‘high art, and “concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings [...] between the members of a society or group” (Hall, 1997:2), in other words “with questions of shared social meanings” and “the various ways we make sense of the world” (Barker 7). In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* Hall points out how deeply intertwined human existence and culture are:

Culture, we may say, is involved in all those practices which are not simply genetically programmed into us [...] but which carry meanings and value for us, which need to be *meaningfully interpreted* by others, or *which depend on meaning* for their effective operation. Culture, in this sense, permeates all of society. It is what distinguishes the ‘human’ element in social life from what is simply biologically driven. (1997:3)

The model of culture I rely upon was developed by Stuart Hall and it assigns language a pivotal part in the process of meaning production due to the fact that it is the main representational system which enables the participants to “build up a culture of shared understandings and so interpret the world in roughly the same ways” (1997:1). His ‘circuit of culture’ – consisting of five major practices of equal standing: representation, regulation, consumption, production and construction of identity, which all interact – stands as proof to the fact that cultural meanings “organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (1997:3) and these very same meanings are constructed by the participants. Meaning is conferred upon objects, people and events partly by the frameworks of interpretation, partly by the way they are used and integrated into everyday practices and in part by the way they are represented, which definition of culture provides the broadest possible context to situate literature in.

With the help of the Cultural Studies approach the ineradicable connection between real life and systems of representation – in our case literature – is established along with the fact that our understanding of both the material world and ourselves is embedded in culture. “A full analysis of any cultural practice requires discussion of both ‘economy’ and ‘culture’” and “the articulation of the relations between them” (Barker 36). Consequently, any representation is cultural and mediated from a certain subject position – in this case that of the author – created by discourse, which justifies their inclusion into the process of literary analysis. The sociological view of culture entails an inclusive rather than exclusive approach to the

determination of context compared to more traditional critical schools and, therefore, yields more complex results than the latter. Since Cultural Studies enables one to observe the workings of representational practices in concrete historical situations, the person of the author as subject also receives added significance in the process of identifying the discourses relevant to the literary work.

Southern Culture and Identity

The latest historical, sociological and cultural studies research agree that the South has a distinctive regional identity whose contribution to the formative period of all four authors cannot be denied and must be considered a starting point for understanding the problematic aspects of the white middle-class female identity addressed by them. Therefore the analysis of their white middle-class Southern female characters within the interpretive framework of their specific time, place and social background is amply elaborated and justified through overviews of the myths of the Old South, especially that of the Southern lady. While these women writers were often taxed earlier for not addressing historical, racial or political issues in the manner of the Southern literary tradition represented by male authors, a careful reading of their fiction and their lives will provide sufficient evidence of the presence of such concerns. Even though lacking the obvious markers of the monumental heroic tradition typical of the mythical South, feminist critics like Louise Westling and Patricia Yaeger were able to discern their interest in how gender and racial politics work in the everyday.

By postulating personhood as a cultural production and accepting identity construction as one of the key processes in Hall's circuit of culture, the link with the rest of the processes — representation, regulation, consumption and production of meaning — is obvious and provides further proof of the necessity to explore the historical, cultural, socio-economic, etc. circumstances of the creation of a work of art. These processes all contribute to the articulation of the self of the author, and consciously or subconsciously influence the way they produce meaning in their representation of a fictional world or characters. The latest research in cultural psychology supports this, since “no sociocultural environment exists independently of the way humans capture meanings [...] from it” and “every human being's mental life is constructed through the processes of apprehending meanings [...] from that environment” (Barker 47) in turn.

Critics agree that the South has put its mark on its writers, while Victorian gender conventions have borne on women with intellectual aspirations more forcefully than in the rest of the United States. Coming from an environment that fostered ‘women's culture’ Porter,

Welty, McCullers and O'Connor were all influenced in some way or other by a female tradition and they all regard their society and the position of the white middle-class woman with a critical eye and with a view to constructing more satisfying self-identities. In spite of the diverse circumstances and aims their characters' journey towards a more authentic selfhood is hindered by the legacy of the Southern lady, an embodiment of patriarchal expectations. The short stories document diverse strategies to cope with the restrictive forces interiorised by many Southern women who, in turn, have become faithful buttresses of patriarchy. These authors are not champions of the New Woman, either: they know the influence of a hundred-year-old tradition cannot be shed like an old garment, they rather portray the difficult passage from the wish to please to the wish to please oneself and not feel guilty about it.

Despite the great variety from partial idealisation of the Old South by Porter through due appreciation and criticism by Welty and O'Connor to scathing critique and simultaneous symbiosis with the South by McCullers one tendency is definitely clear: these authors considered themselves Southerners and their region as incumbent on their art in some way or other. It follows that the exploration of the complex relationship between their lives as women, who received a Southern upbringing and as adults felt related to a Southern cultural tradition, is a valid complementary approach to their works of art that reflect on various aspects of these experiences.

Porter's Fashioning of Southern Female Identity

Porter's Miranda-stories give a historical overview of the evolution of the female subject position rooted in the antebellum times of Sophia Jane's youth, which took divergent paths in the 1880s figures of Aunt Amy and Cousin Eva. Miranda, Porter's alter ego, brought up on family legend and lore in the 1890s, is introduced as a child and later a young woman trying to come to terms with this legacy during the 1910s and World War I. These stories, although revealing aspects of women's lives not covered by the official narrative, also present the mythical patriarchal world of old, which is covertly part of the background of Welty, McCullers and O'Connor's works. All the analysed Porter characters' lives demonstrate how the myth of Southern womanhood, promoted and upheld by the patriarchy, affected the identity construction of Southern females.

All these figures expose anomalies in the patriarchal system and portray variations on the rigid subject-positions white middle-class women were expected to fulfil. What they all share is a belief in women's intellectual capabilities, what they all repress, as befits Southern ladies,

is their sensuality, and what they all lack is, surprisingly, the presence of a supportive community of women, the kind described by Welty. Although they do not step outside of the boundaries of patriarchy, the technologies of the self they adopt betray a growing sense of independence in each generation.

Welty – Singleness and Community

Eudora Welty's female characters lead lives that are very much determined by the presence or absence of a community whose everyday is orchestrated by a group of women. 'Women's culture' is alive and rich, in most cases forming a protective circle around young and old, married and single alike. Significantly, the female characters are not solely defined through their relationship with men, and the network of communication makes sure that its members do not become as isolated as Porter's women. The exploration of this aspect of women's lives during the first half of the twentieth century provides the opportunity to investigate alternative subject positions and to portray adherence to conventional patriarchal values as well, through the matron figures or the group of adolescent girls anxious to live up to expectations, for instance.

Welty's exploration of the subject position of the single woman in the South reveals a far richer picture than the traditionally marginal positions of the spinster, the coquette or the professional woman of the master narrative created by male authors in the nineteenth century. The most exciting aspect of her heroines is their attempt to rewrite the dominant narratives so that they incorporate certain traditionally repressed parts of their psyche: sensuality, anger, grief, ambition or sexuality. The sheer number of Welty's single female characters already points at her belief in alternatives to the subject positions promoted by patriarchy, but her portrayal of the unconventional figures in the bosom of their community also indicates that Southern women's concept of individuality has indeed started to change and make itself felt in public.

Young and old, unmarried, betrayed or widowed, Welty's female characters all explore alternatives to the traditional role in times when social change makes the revision of conventional assumptions inevitable. Femininity and sexuality in the South proved to be far more complex in her stories starting from adolescence, and especially so for women who choose to be or happen to stay single. As demonstrated by a great variety of scenarios, Welty opens a new perspective on the lives of single women who are embedded in women's culture and embody diverse reactions to the communal expectations.

McCullers and the Disintegration of Traditional Womanhood

McCullers successfully questions the norm of the gendered self, on the one hand, by placing her characters in Southern settings which have not conserved the traditional elements of female existence, and on the other hand, by creating deviant figures. In order to achieve this, she skilfully balances Miss Amelia's characteristics: grotesque though, she is a functioning member of the community until transformed into a freak by grief. Through her McCullers portrays an alternative subject position for women: that of the speaking subject in man's world, and also outlines the economic and social circumstances that make this possible. However, the fact that Miss Amelia leads a genderless existence clearly indicates what had to be overcome or perhaps sacrificed in the author's view to fulfil the speaking subject position outside the woman's sphere. McCullers's personal experience doubtlessly helped her to look behind the naturalisation processes, the dividing techniques and the self-policing all subject positions entail. What I find really striking is their masterly deployment in her experimentation with questions regarding personhood and the process of subjectification way before such concerns were articulated in social sciences, let alone literary analysis.

McCullers's art yet again confirms the strong grip of norms and expectations of normalcy on the identity construction of Southern women. While their rigid life pattern has expanded in consequence of modernisation, the short stories very realistically depict the heroines' ambivalent reactions to the loss of a supportive female community and the adolescents finally choose conformity. However, not before experimenting with possibilities of identification traditionally unavailable in the South, which was a lifelong concern of the author herself. By unveiling very personal questions hitherto unasked publicly by Southern women, McCullers herself as author entered the category of the freak, whose position she understood so well, to emerge as a writer attempting to formulate what was to become queer theory decades later. In this light, her works and characters can be reinterpreted as representatives of a plurality aggressively kept at bay by Southern conventions – a position McCullers herself has challenged and partly thrown over.

O'Connor's Grotesque Womenfolk

Flannery O'Connor, just like McCullers, also addresses the problem of growing up female in the South through her teenage characters with autobiographical features, and both have placed emphasis on an adult character whose emotional development is arrested somewhere in childhood or adolescence. Although the ladies who would be willingly their role models are very much present in her fiction, they only emphasise appearance and

manners: the very things the intellectual but ugly daughters refuse to care about in the stubborn belief that their intelligence is superior to their clumsy bodies. In contrast with Welty's harmonious community of women, the relationship between the two generations is a constant battle, and the third member of the grotesque triangle is the white tenant woman, despised by both. O'Connor robs the figure of the lady of all the glamour and criticises the prudish, class-conscious women who are unable to understand anything that is not in line with their mentality. They do not seem to have a self-identity and are very willing to fulfil their subject position, the same that the daughters fight tooth and nail, who finally become grotesque figures themselves in their attempt at self-definition. The repulsive characteristics tend to be, however, divided along class lines: complacency, narrow-mindedness seem to be reserved for the lady whose physical characteristics are in line with her station, while the obese or big-boned women with a taste for gossip and the morbid are typically their tenants who stand for a less refined group of white women. Downright rudeness and ugliness, in fact, seems to be the privilege of the lady's daughter who would like to distinguish herself from her mother at all costs. Through her peculiar use of the grotesque O'Connor, too, illustrates the crippling effects of the Southern tradition on female identity construction, revealing the precarious fragility of the basis for any Southern identity.

Works cited:

- Barker, Chris. *Cultural Studies — Theory and Practice*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003.
- Formations of Modernity*. Eds. Stuart Hall & Bram Gieben. Oxford: Polity Press, 1995.
- Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall. London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997.